

Dual Diagnosis Hikes Costs of VA Substance Abuse Treatment

VA costs for treating patients with substance use disorders are considerably and persistently higher for those who also have a mental illness (dual diagnosis). To study the impact of dual diagnosis, MIRECC health services investigators, Rani Hoff, Ph.D. and Robert Rosenheck, M.D., tracked VA treatment costs from 1991-1996 in a nationwide sample of patients with substance use disorders.

Compared to patients with substance use diagnoses only, dually diagnosed veterans' average yearly treatment costs were more than 30% higher over the entire six year period. This difference was explained by increased use of outpatient psychiatric and substance abuse treatment. Notably, costs for both groups fell by over 50% in the 6 year period, accounted for primarily by reduced inpatient substance abuse treatment. The authors attribute the added costs both to greater illness severity in dually diagnosed patients and to inefficient coordination between mental health and substance abuse services.